

Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thaksin*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2009. x+422 pp. Paperbound: ISBN 978-974-9511-79-4

No personality has so transfixed the attention of the Thai public over the course of the past decade as Thaksin Shinawatra, a self-made billionaire who entered the political arena in the mid-1990s ultimately to attain and then lose the premiership amidst a rising tide of political polarization and public scandal. Despite his ouster from office in September 2006 followed by his flight into exile as a fugitive from justice in October 2008, Thaksin continues to cast a long shadow over the Thai political scene. His gripping story continues to dominate the Thai news media and popular imagination with nearly daily accounts of new twists and turns in the ongoing contest for control of Thailand's political soul. More than perhaps any biography in Thai history, the saga of Thaksin's precipitous rise and fall resonates as a morality tale comparing Thai norms of political behavior with global standards of ethical conduct in public office.

As an accomplished duo of close observers of the Thai political and economic scene, Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker have in this eponymous volume performed a valuable service in distilling the convoluted tale of Thaksin's rise and fall for an international audience. More than that, they have provided an authoritative account of Thailand's current political crisis, the mounting sectarian conflict in which Thaksin

continues to play a role from afar. Their absorbing narrative is necessarily a courageous undertaking, as the object of the authors' critique is still very much alive and kicking. It deserves to be read by all those who have an interest in the enigmatic personality who, more than any other over the course of the past decade, has shaped Thailand's ongoing struggle towards participatory democracy.

Throughout the volume, Pasuk and Baker pursue two themes. One summarizes the course of Thaksin's rise to power and the backlash that culminated in his downfall. The other examines the broader political and economic context that shaped the course of his venture to reshape the Thai body politic. As the book is titled "Thaksin" and not "Thailand's Recent Political History," I shall here focus on the thread of Thaksin's biography. That is a bit of a problem because Thaksin the person, as distinct from Thaksin the politician, tends to get submerged in the book's torrent of information on recent Thai political currents.

Stylistically, the book is evocative of Bob Woodward's acclaimed "instant histories" of recent US presidencies. Like Woodward, Pasuk and Baker present the flow of recent Thai political developments centering on Thaksin as a seamless narrative compressed into a fact-filled exposition that races along at an unrelenting pace. Unlike Woodward, however, their presentation is not replete with first-hand interviews, human-interest anecdotes, and presumptions of "decent intentions". Instead, their

account consists in large measure of a distillation of news reports appearing in the Thai press supplemented by an assortment of recent academic studies. As a result, the book occupies a place somewhere between journalism and scholarship.

The volume under review is a considerably extended version—a so-called second edition—of a book of the same title published in 2004. Review of a second edition would ordinarily demand comparison with the first. In the present case that is not an issue. Called a new edition, the book actually reproduces in Part One the original text essentially unchanged and then carries the narrative forward with an entirely new Part Two. That division, split at 2004—the high point in Thaksin’s political career—quite appropriately traces first Thaksin’s rise, and then his fall. With the continuing flow of reportage featuring Thaksin since the publication of the second edition—his unremitting instigation of the Thai political opposition, his disruptive intervention in Thai-Cambodian relations, his losses from the Dubai financial collapse, the impending Thai court judgment concerning his frozen assets—can a third edition of the *Thaksin* saga be far distant? Or perhaps it can be argued that this second edition was issued prematurely, that it should have been delayed at least until the watershed court decision on Thaksin’s assets.

The essentials of Thaksin’s career can be extracted from the densely packed text as follows. Part One recounts Thaksin’s origins and his

ascent to business success and political power. Born in 1949 into a prosperous Chiangmai family with Hakka Chinese roots, he was a canny striver from the start, graduating at the top of his class at the Police Academy, gaining a PhD in criminal law at a US university, marrying into a notable police-connected family, serving in the police while dabbling in a computer leasing business, and in 1987 resigning from the police to devote his energies fully to building his fortune through the cultivation of political connections and acquisition of government concessions (i. e., monopoly stakes) in the telecommunications industry. The politics of the concessions-granting racket inevitably lured him into the Thai political arena. In 1994 he gained the post of foreign minister, and then he rose to heightened prominence as a deputy prime minister shortly before the financial panic of 1997. Somehow, he weathered the crisis well, possibly through judicious hedging based on inside information, and so his wealth continued to grow while many others fell by the wayside.

In mid-1998 Thaksin founded the Thai Rak Thai Party (TRT). Initially welcomed as a departure from factional politics, TRT’s diverse constituency soon came to be dominated by big business. To counter that negative perception Thaksin courted the rural vote with a dramatic platform of spending programs addressing issues of particular concern to the rural masses. Though that electioneering gambit threatened to drain the government’s budgetary reserves, Thaksin’s charismatic

leadership, campaign promises, and old-style machine politics allowed TRT to win the election handsomely, and he was installed as prime minister in 2001. His first term in office focused on basic economic, social, and political reforms, with corporate-style management serving as a talismanic means to achieving his objectives. Accompanying those reforms was a rapid slide to one-party dominance, growing nepotism, and the mutation of the old-style money politics into a new big-money politics, accompanied by a massive flow of benefits to the increasingly diversified Shinawatra family commercial empire.

Part Two provides an equally fact-packed narrative detailing Thaksin's precipitous descent over the five years since 2004. The process started with the estrangement of many of Thaksin's allies in the face of his increasingly authoritarian responses while his search for a reliable constituency lured him towards an equally strident populism. The tactic worked, and he was re-elected to office in early 2005 with a resounding majority, but at the cost of rising sectional and sectoral animosities. That victory mobilized a conservative backlash that eventually crystallized into a formal government inquiry. After preliminary corruption investigations concerning the setting up of Bangkok's new international airport, share ramping on the Bangkok stock exchange, the distribution of rubber seedlings to smallholders, the purchase of computers for government agencies, the building of tenements for slum dwellers, and the

disappearance of lottery revenues, the corruption charges against Thaksin and his regime climaxed in January 2006 following the sale of Thaksin's flagship company, Shin Corp, under exceedingly dubious circumstances. In the ensuing chaos, Thaksin dissolved Parliament and called new elections, which were duly invalidated by the courts on technical grounds.

The government's increasingly tenuous authority culminated in September 2006 in a military coup while Thaksin was overseas. Rather than return to Thailand, he and his family remained overseas, where he orchestrated a campaign of harassment against the coup group and its confederates. In the following months various court cases against Thaksin, family members, and close associates were pursued with a vengeance. In early 2008 Thaksin and his wife finally returned to Thailand, but then in the midst of accelerated court proceedings on various corruption charges they fled the country a second time. Later that year, Thaksin was found guilty in absentia of abuse of power and sentenced to two years in jail, making him a fugitive from Thai justice. In exile, he suffered the further indignities of revocation of several visas, withdrawal of his diplomatic passport, significant shrinkage of his financial worth, and divorce from his wife of 36 years. Subsequent events in Thailand, centering on a dangerous escalation of civil disorder, saw him play the spoiler's role of distant agitator. And there, as of early 2009, the narrative ends.

Missing from Pasuk and Baker's otherwise excellent exposition of Thaksin's rise and fall is the human-interest dimension of investigative journalism, the personal anecdotes and psychological insights that, as in Woodward's "instant histories," serve to vitalize the protagonist's life struggle and ultimately help explain his behavior. In tracing the course of Thaksin's actions and the events that they precipitated, the book reveals much about his career in public affairs, but it never really gets inside his skin to analyze the compulsions and impulses that make him tick—his moral grounding (or lack thereof), his considerable personal charm, his Machiavellian craftiness, his overweening self-esteem, his bewildering choices of allies and adversaries, his equally raveled relations with the Crown, his seemingly unquenchable thirst for wealth and power (and for vengeance when thwarted), and so forth.

The book concludes with a summary interpretation of the contemporary Thai political crisis, in which Thaksin is portrayed in the incongruous role of self-proclaimed champion of the oppressed—"a super-rich tycoon calling for revolution" (p. 362). Here finally the authors reveal something of their personal opinions, referring to Thaksin as "a man of no real principle, ethical or political" (p. 354), stating that "Thaksin's project was built around a fatal confusion. . . . Throughout his career, politics and profit-making were entwined around one another like a pair of copulating snakes. . . . It

was impossible to separate his quest for greater power to effect social and economic change from his quest for greater power to make money" (p. 356). With that characterization, Thaksin's personal drama takes on the trappings of a Faustian parable, pursuing an ageless, universal theme:

MEPHISTOPHELES—  
Two functions would he pleasantly  
combine,  
In fact he thought his notion very fine:  
To govern, and indulge his appetite.

FAUST—  
A woeful error. He who has to hold  
Command of men must have a leader's  
mind,  
Joy in authority, lofty will and bold,  
A will not by the common herd  
divined,  
To trusted ears he tells his quiet intent,  
And this is done — to nations'  
wonderment.  
So stands he high, supreme, and so  
obeyed,  
The noblest still. Indulgence must  
degrade.

— Johann Wolfgang von Goethe [1832],  
*Faust*, Part II, Act IV.

Edward Van Roy